

Library of Congress
Health Services Division
Staff Guidance on Use of Masks

In mid-April the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention revised its guidance to encourage people to wear face coverings in order to limit the spread of COVID-19 from asymptomatic and pre-symptomatic infected individuals who do not exhibit symptoms (asymptomatic) or have not yet started to experience symptoms (pre-symptomatic).

While the risk is minimal if you simply walk past someone without a mask or are in their presence for less than five minutes, wearing a mask is a simple way to reduce the transmission of COVID-19.

An April 24, 2020 New England Journal Editorial, cites “the clear evidence of SARS-CoV-2 transmission from asymptomatic persons” . . . as one of the factors that “supports the case for the general public to use face masks, when in crowded outdoor or indoor spaces.” Further stating that “this unprecedented pandemic calls for unprecedented measures to achieve its ultimate defeat.”

These new recommendations resulted in questions about what kind of masks people should wear and why.

In general, masks can perform two functions – they can protect the person wearing the mask from germs around them and they can also prevent an asymptomatic or pre-symptomatic person from unknowingly spreading germs.

For medical professionals and clinical laboratory personnel, special masks are needed to prevent them from being infected in highly contagious situations. In these cases, [N95 respirators or hospital grade surgical masks](#), are necessary for some people, particularly medical or clinical laboratory personnel. These masks require proper fit testing for medically assessed users to assure they are used safely and correctly with precise training for how to use, put on and take off the mask and take care of them. The CDC **does not recommend** that the public wear N95 respirators or hospital grade surgical masks.

For the general public, the use of [cloth face coverings](#), barrier masks and other similar products can successfully and with relative ease block outward transmission of the virus at the source. The

CDC fact sheet linked above includes instructions that can help you make your own cloth face mask with items that you may have at home.

Cloth masks need to fit snugly over the nose and mouth so that movement of your head or neck will not raise or lower the mask causing you to constantly touch your face and mask to adjust.

Cloth face coverings can typically be hand washed daily (as long as no filters are sewn in) and left out to air dry overnight.

While in short supply in many places, disposable face masks are also an option for most people. Given the limited supply of disposable face masks, the CDC has stated that they can be reused in a limited way. When reusing a facemask, you should take care to ensure that you do not touch the outer surfaces of the mask and that mask removal and replacement be done in a careful and deliberate manner. You should not reuse a disposable face mask if it is soiled, damaged, or it becomes hard to breathe through it. There is no proven method for cleaning of these types of masks. Lysol and disinfecting sprays can cause skin irritation if exposed for prolonged periods of time, and if masks are subjected to water or moisture, it will break down the integrity of the mask. Heating the masks in an oven is also not safe. Proper removal and storage of disposable face masks in a paper bag, NOT plastic as directed in the guide on the use and care of masks will help to ensure that they stay clean and re-usable.

We encourage you and your family to wear a mask in public situations. This will protect you from illness and if you are in an asymptomatic or pre-symptomatic stage of infection, a mask will protect those around you.